

Author Meets the Critics: *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*
by H. Michael Marquardt

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Paper for Author Meets the Critics, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*, three volumes, by Brian C. Hales. Presented at the John Whitmer Historical Association 41st Annual Meeting, September 27, 2013, Council Bluffs, Iowa.

I appreciate being able to critique *Joseph Smith's Polygamy* by Brian Hales. The three volumes comprise over thirteen hundred pages. There is a lot of repetition of quotations throughout the volumes. Since plural marriage is the topic of the volumes it would be appropriate to present a brief historical overview.

In Latter-day Saint practice there was a gradual development in the custom of marriage. For the first ten years of its existence the church upheld the practice of one man being married to one wife. This position was published in the first edition of the Doctrine and Covenants printed in the state of Ohio. The article indicates that a marriage should be solemnized in public and states the position clearly: "we believe, that one man should have one wife; and one woman, but one husband."¹

In the volumes there are repeated references concerning a girl named Fanny Alger, as a wife of Joseph Smith. One source used is by Mosiah Hancock, who was born in 1834. According to this story his father, Levi Hancock, was to perform a marriage ceremony between Joseph Smith and Fanny Alger.² Oliver Cowdery, assistant church president, indicated there was a problem with Smith's association with this girl. Smith, according to Cowdery, went back on his word³ and Cowdery withdrew from the church in 1838.⁴

The Latter-day Saint version of having more than one wife was secretly taught and practiced in Nauvoo, Illinois. The law in Illinois, enacted as early as 1833, includes with punishment:

Bigamy consists in having of two wives or two husbands at one and the same time, knowing that the former husband or wife is still alive. . . . on conviction thereof, be punished by a fine not exceeding one thousand dollars, and imprisoned in the penitentiary not exceeding two years. . . . If any man or woman being unmarried, shall knowingly marry the husband

¹ "Marriage," *Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of the Latter Day Saints* (Kirtland, Ohio: Printed by F. G. Williams & co., for the Proprietors, 1835), section 101, p. 251.

² Mosiah L. Hancock, "Autobiography of Levi Ward Hancock," circa 1896, LDS Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.

³ Oliver Cowdery to Warren A. Cowdery, January 21, 1838, Oliver Cowdery Letterbook, 81, Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

⁴ Donald Q. Cannon and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *Far West Record: Minutes of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1830-1844* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 164-66.

or wife of another, such man or woman shall, on conviction, be fined not more than five hundred dollars, or imprisoned not more than one year.⁵

Joseph Smith, church prophet-president, was the originator of the practice of plural marriage. For the first two years he did not tell Emma Hale Smith, his legal and lawful wife, or his elder brother Hyrum that a man could have two wives. Nor did Smith tell his two counselors in the church's first presidency, William Law and Sidney Rigdon, about this new priesthood ordinance. Apostles Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball and Willard Richards were secretly taught the nature of polygamy as a priesthood doctrine.

Many questions still remain unanswered because of the secret nature of the practice. When unauthorized discussions of plural marriage beliefs were made public those involved denied the practice. The reasons for this denial is that it was against the Ten Commandments, against church law as outlined in revelations received in 1831, against the article on Marriage accepted in the first edition of the Doctrine and Covenant in 1835, and also against Illinois law.

The religious ceremony of celestial marriage included the possibility of single, married, or widowed women being sealed in a priesthood rite to founding prophet Joseph Smith. The promise was, if faithful, they would enter the celestial kingdom of heaven with themselves, their families, and be associated with Smith for eternity. This was known as spiritual wifery, celestial or heavenly marriage, plural marriage, or the principle.

The first recognized sealing in Nauvoo was that of Louisa Beaman to Joseph Smith performed by Joseph Noble in 1841.⁶ Women were secretly married (or in LDS language sealed by the priesthood) to Smith or other men without courtship. Many of the young single women because of their commitment in a plural relationship would not be able to marry a man near their own age.

At a meeting of the Nauvoo Female Relief Society an Epistle was read, which is not cited in the three volumes under consideration, concerning several men who made unorthodox advances on women to justify their behavior.

The Epistle indicates the serious nature of events in the city of Nauvoo and denounced in the strongest language the following:

We do not mention their names, not knowing but what there may be some among you who are not sufficiently skill'd in Masonry as to keep a secret, therefore, suffice it to say, there are those, and we therefore warn you, & forewarn you, in the name of the Lord, to check & destroy any faith that any innocent person may have in any such character; for we do not want any one to believe *any thing* as coming from us, contrary to the old established morals & virtues & scriptural laws, regulating the habits, customs & conduct of society; and all persons pretending to be authoriz'd by us, or having any permit, or sanction from us, are & will be *liars* &

⁵ *The Revised Laws of Illinois* (Vandalia: Printed by Greiner & Sherman, 1833), 198.

⁶ Affidavit of Joseph B. Noble, June 26, 1869, Joseph F. Smith Affidavit Book 1:38, original in LDS Church History Library. See also Andrew Jenson, "Plural Marriage," *Historical Record* 6 (May 1887):221, Salt Lake City.

*base impostors, & you are authoriz'd on the very first intimation of the kind, to denounce them as such, . . . whether they are prophets, Seers, or revelators; Patriarchs, twelve Apostles, Elders, Priests, Mayors, . . . Let this Epistle be had as a private matter in your Society, and then we shall learn whether you are good masons.*⁷

The Epistle was signed by church president Joseph Smith, president of the twelve apostles Brigham Young, apostles Heber C. Kimball and Willard Richards, church patriarch Hyrum Smith, and bishop Vinson Knight.

Disclosures of Nauvoo polygamy were brought to the attention of the general public in 1842 a year after Joseph Smith's first known Nauvoo sealing. John C. Bennett, who himself was involved with female companions, exposed in part the spiritual wife doctrine. Bennett received some information from Smith. In Bennett's book *History of the Saints* he wrote that "Smith was privately married to his spiritual wives" and he included a list, without actually naming them, of seven spiritual or plural wives.⁸

Two of the women known by Bennett were Miss Louisa Beaman sealed by Joseph Bates Noble in April 1841 and Agnes Coolbrith Smith (widow of Don Carlos Smith) sealed by Apostle Brigham Young in January 1842. Bennett also knew of the arrangement between Joseph Smith and Mrs. Patty Sessions in March 9, 1842.

Joseph Smith's Polygamy does not quote or refer to John C. Bennett's withdrawal from the church on May 17, 1842 with "the best of feelings."⁹ There is no examination of the friendship between Bennett and Smith. The date of May 11, 1842 is given as the date of Bennett's excommunication, based upon a withdrawal by the First Presidency, some of the twelve apostles and bishops.¹⁰ The correct date is June 18, 1842 as Bennett wrote, "On Saturday, the 18th of June, I was excommunicated from this holy sect."¹¹

⁷ A Book of Records, Containing the proceedings of The Female Relief Society of Nauvoo, 86-88, LDS Church History Library, emphasis retained. The epistle was recorded at the end of the September 28, 1842 meeting.

⁸ John C. Bennett, *The History of the Saints; or an Exposé of Joe Smith and Mormonism* (Boston: Leland and Whiting, 1842), 256.

⁹ Letters Sent, Box 2, folder 5, Joseph Smith Collection, Church History Library. For John C. Bennett's printed copy see Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 40-41, with the added notation the same day: "The above is a true copy from the original. Orson Pratt." When Bennett joined with James J. Strang he produced his withdrawal. "Conference Minutes," *Voree Herald* 1 (October 1846):1, Voree, Wisconsin Territory.

¹⁰ "Notice," Box 5, folder 16, May 11, 1842, Joseph Smith Collection, Church History Library, Salt Lake City. Willard Richards wrote in the names of John E. Page, William Smith, and George A. Smith. Page was not in Nauvoo but in Pittsburgh. Orson Pratt's name was also added by Richards and crossed out.

¹¹ John C. Bennett, Letter [No. 1], June 27, 1842, "To the Editor of the Journal," *Sangamo Journal* 10 (July 8, 1842):2. See also Andrew F. Smith, *The Saintly Scoundrel: The Life and Times of Dr. John Cook Bennett* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 91.

Sarah Ann Whitney was sealed to Joseph Smith in July 1842 by her father Newel K. Whitney.¹² The next month in a letter to the Whitney family Smith wanted to get together with three members of the family but wrote to make sure Emma does not come.¹³ Later in April 1843 Joseph Smith performed a pretended civil ceremony between Sarah Ann and Joseph C. Kingsbury.¹⁴ This was done to keep the knowledge of Smith's marriage from Emma Smith.

Whatever Joseph Smith's reasoning for celestial marriage he knew Emma would not approve of having women sealed to her husband. Later in her short-lived conversion to the principle Emma did consent to some sealings in 1843.

Those sealed to Smith were not publicly known as plural wives. For example, they did not go with him to public meetings or social activities. They had no legal status as wives of Joseph Smith. Those married women who were sealed to Smith also did not go to church meetings with him.

Only a limited number of church members knew about the command to practice polygamy and there were some honest denials. In a twist of events Joseph Smith told about bringing to church trial those who were "practicing the doctrine of plurality of wives" and that "no man shall have but one wife."¹⁵ Because of what was taught the Nauvoo church broke up into various Restoration factions, with the Smith family being divided over the practice and in 1844 the destruction of the *Nauvoo Expositor* that led to the death of Joseph and Hyrum Smith.

Brian Hales three volumes are not the last study on polygamy but it is an important work for students of this topic. Thank you.

¹² H. Michael Marquardt, *Joseph Smith's 1828-1844 Revelations* (Maitland, Florida: Xulon Press, 2013), 265-66.

¹³ Joseph Smith to "Dear, and Beloved, Brother and Sister, Whitney, and &c," August 18, 1842, in H. Michael Marquardt, *The Rise of Mormonism: 1816-1844*, second edition, revised and enlarged (Maitland, Florida: Xulon Press, 2013), 355.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 358-59.

¹⁵ Joseph Smith Journal kept by Willard Richards, entry for October 5, 1843, LDS Church History Library.

Additional sources cited during Questions and Answers at JWHA

Richard Hewitt

Family tradition tells a story of when Richard Hewitt came home and said he heard some false doctrine being taught, evidently about polygamy. The family was preparing supper but Richard was intent on going to Nauvoo to find out the truth of what he heard. “No, I will neither eat or sleep until I have seen Joseph or Hyrum, and know whether there is such evil taught in the church.” He rode on horseback to Nauvoo and saw Hyrum Smith. The above is summarized from Lettie Jane Maloney Hartman, “Memories of Childhood,” *Autumn Leaves* 23 (September 1910): 395.

The following is an extract from the notice was printed in the *Times and Seasons*:

Whereas brother Richard Hewitt has called on me to-day, to know my views concerning some doctrines that are preached in your place, and states to me that some of your elders say, that a man *having a certain priesthood*, may have as many wives as he pleases, and that doctrine [doctrine] is taught here: I say unto you that that man teaches *false doctrine*, for there is no such doctrine taught here; neither is there any such thing practised here. And any man that is found teaching privately or publicly any such doctrine, is culpable, and will stand a chance to be brought before the High Council, and lose his license and membership also: therefore he had better beware what he is about.

Hyrum Smith, “To the brethren of the church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, living at China Creek, in Hancock County, Greeting,” March 15, 1844, *Times and Seasons* 5, no. 6 (March 15, 1844): 474, emphasis retained.

William Marks

Joseph, however, became convinced before his death that he had done wrong; for about three weeks before his death, I met him one morning in the street, and he said to me, Brother Marks, I have something to communicate to you, we retired to a by-place, and set [sat] down together, when he said: “We are a ruined people.” I asked how so? he said: “This doctrine of polygamy, or Spiritual-wife system, that has been taught and practiced among us, will prove our destruction and overthrow. I have been deceived,” said he, “in reference to its practice; it is wrong; it is a curse to mankind, and we shall have to leave the United States soon, unless it can be put down, and its practice stopped in the church. Now,” said he, “Brother Marks you have not received this doctrine, and how glad I am. I want you to go into the high council, and I will have charges preferred against all who practice this doctrine, and I want you to try them by the laws of the church, and cut them off, if they will not repent, and cease the practice of this doctrine; and” said he, “I will go into the stand, and preach against it, with all my might, and in this way we may rid the church of this damnable heresy.”

But before this plan could be put into execution, the mob began to gather, and our attention, necessarily, was directed to them.

“Epistle of Wm. Marks,” June 15, 1853, *Zion’s Harbinger, and Baneemy’s Organ* 3, no. 7 (July 1853): 53, St. Louis.

Charles B. Thompson

The following is an extract from a letter of Charles B. Thompson to John L. Traugher Jr., no date:

It was no secret among all the elders of the church at Nauvoo, at least it was talked of confidently among them, that there was in existence, in 1843-4, a secret quorum, called the 'Quorum of the Priesthood; who were commanded <by revelation> to practice polygamy, and that it would be the privilege of all the chosen after the endowment; and many women were pointed out to me as the sealed wives of Joseph Smith, as early as the fall of 1843. It is true those persons with whom I talked, conversed in confidence, as I understood it was a secret not [to] be publicly revealed until some future time; and I learned from an honored member of this secret quorum, after Smith's death, that Smith's desire to have Wm. Law's wife sealed to him, was the cause of Law's apostacy, . . . The sealed wives of Smith and others at Nauvoo, before Smith's death, were called Spiritual wives, sealed for eternity; but as it got out that they cohabited with them, it was explained that this world is a part of eternity.

John L. Traugher Papers, MS 666, Manuscripts Division, Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City.

William E. McLellin

Mrs. Joseph Smith, the widow of the Prophet, told me in 1847 that she knew her husband the Prophet practiced both adultery and polygamy.

William E. McLellin Notebook, circa 1880, cited in Stan Larson and Samuel J. Passey, eds., *The William E. McLellin Papers, 1854-1880* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2007), 395.

Extract from a letter of William E. McLellin to John L. Traugher Jr., December 6, 1875:

I visited Mrs. Emma Smith in Nauvoo, in 1847. She told me plainly and frankly that her husband did receive and deliver the Polygamic revelation himself, and she knew he practiced its provisions. And she said she knew he had committed adultery with girls previous to that.

(Some Statements by Dr. W. E. McLellan, John L. Traugher Papers, University of Utah)

Apostles Joseph F. Smith and Orson Pratt visited William E. McLellin on September 6, 1878, and Joseph F. Smith wrote in his journal:

He said Emma Smith told him that Joseph was both a polygamist and an adulterer.

Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Life of Joseph F. Smith Sixth President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1938), 239.